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20-Year Hispanic Academic Gaps Persist in Math, Reading

NAEP report finds students gain, but not fast enough

By Sarah D. Sparks

While growing numbers of Hispanic students have changed the face of American education in the past two decades, the gap between them and their white classmates in math and reading remains as wide as it was in the 1990s, says a new federal study.

The National Center for Education Statistics **report**, released June 23, finds that Hispanic students have improved significantly on the National Assessment of Educational Progress since 1990. The mean scale scores in mathematics rose 28 points for Hispanic 4th graders and 21 points for 8th graders; in reading, the scores improved 10 points in the 4th and 8th grades from the early 1990s to 2009, with each 10-point increase equal to about one grade level of improvement.

Yet non-Hispanic white students exceeded Hispanic students' increase in math in both the 4th and 8th grades during the same time, and while white students' performance improved more slowly in reading, the growth was not slow enough for Hispanic students to catch up and close the gaps of more than two grade levels between the groups in both subjects.

"I think with this report coming out, people can respond in two ways," said Raul González, the director of legislative affairs for the Washington-based National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic-advocacy organization. "We can say, 'Well, we tried and we failed, so let's not try anymore,' or we can look at the data and say, 'If 20 to 25 percent of your school system's kids are not doing well, we need to do something urgent.'"

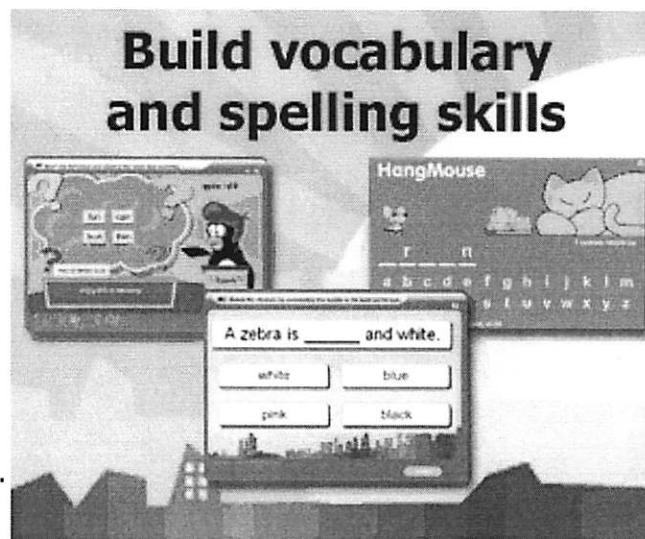
The report, the second in a series by NCES analyzing long-term trends for student groups on the NAEP, compares students' average scale scores on the tests, not the percentages of students who reach each proficiency level.

The **first study**, in 2009, found narrowing achievement gaps between black and white students in 4th grade math and reading and 8th grade math, but there, too, white students retained a two-grade-level performance advantage on NAEP.

The new study came just days after the release of the latest NAEP results for U.S. history. The nation's 8th graders made gains from four years earlier, with much of that attributed to stronger achievement for Hispanic and black students. However, even with the growth, only 17 percent of 8th graders overall were proficient or better.

Meanwhile, although 4th and 12th graders made no measurable gains compared with 2006, when

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examining their historical progress back to 1994, Hispanic and black 4th graders both have posted sizable improvements and reduced the gap with non-Hispanic whites.

Overall, however, only 12 percent of seniors and 20 percent of 4th graders scored proficient or higher in history.

Language and Poverty

The NCES study of Hispanic students also points to some signs of improvement. Among students in poverty, as identified by the National School Lunch Program, Hispanic and white students both improved significantly in math in both grades between 2003, when the data were first disaggregated, and 2009. Achievement gaps narrowed a bit in grade 4 and shrank in grade 8 from 17 points to 13 points.

Language ability also seems to play a role in the achievement gap, the data show. Between 1998, when data were first disaggregated, and 2009, the reading gap between English-proficient Hispanic students and their white peers shrank significantly, from 24 points to 15 points in 4th grade and from 22 points to 15 points in 8th grade.

By contrast, the reading gap between Hispanic English-language learners and their white peers actually rose by a point in 8th grade during the same time, and shrank by 13 points in 4th grade, an amount that was statistically not significant for that group because of differences in the sample sizes.

Yet NCES Commissioner Sean P. "Jack" Buckley said he would balk at saying English-language gaps are a bigger issue than racial disparities, in part because each state can use different accommodations for English-language learners taking the assessment.

In more-detailed data tables not included in the report, Mr. Buckley said researchers have found that within the Hispanic student group as a whole, "it would appear we have evidence that the cohorts of lowest-performing kids have increased [their scores] at a higher rate than the higher-performing kids."

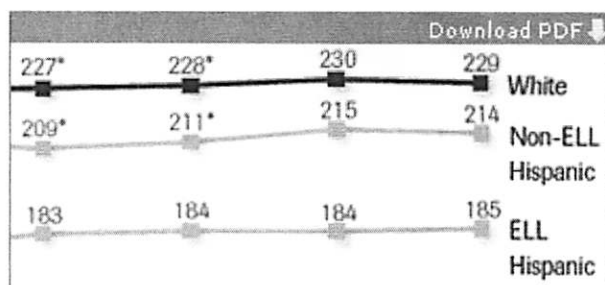
Yet these gains among the lowest-performing Hispanic students were not large enough to close the gaps between the two groups appreciably, he said. "Whatever policies have [been] implemented ... in the last 20 years or so ... would not have appeared to have been effective at closing the gaps, though they did seem to be effective in raising scores for both groups," Mr. Buckley said.

State Differences

As of 2009, Hispanic students trailed non-Hispanic white students by more than two grade levels across the board, including math gaps of 21 points in 4th grade and 26 points in 8th grade, as well as reading gaps of 25 points in 4th grade and 24 in 8th grade.

Trends in Reading

Achievement gaps have narrowed since 1998 between white students and Hispanic students who are not classified as English-language learners on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in reading. But the progress has been less marked for Hispanic ELLs, who continue to trail far behind both white students and Hispanic students with better English-language skills in both 4th and 8th grades. At the 8th grade level, the 32-point gap between ELL and non-ELL Hispanics grew by 7 scale-score points, to 39, between 1998 and 2009.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

Most states hewed close to the average gap, but Hispanic students in some states fared better than others. Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, and Wyoming all had achievement gaps smaller than 15 points in both grades and subjects, while California and Connecticut had larger achievement gaps than the national average in math and in 4th grade reading. Several states did not have sufficient data on Hispanic or white students in given assessments to be included in the NAEP report at all.

Iris M. Chavez, the education policy coordinator for the Washington-based League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, said her group finds the state results “unfortunately are not surprising.”

Ms. Chavez partially attributes the lack of progress in some of the states with large Hispanic student populations to waves of recent laws, particularly in heavily Hispanic Southwestern states, requiring English-only instruction and greater scrutiny of immigrant students entering public schools. “From LULAC’s perspective, you’ve seen some really backward movement in those states,” she said. “While those states should have been the ones making the biggest gains, politically they’ve moved backwards, and that has had a tremendous detrimental effect on these students.”

Florida, however, is bucking the trend. It had less than half the national reading gap in grades 4 and 8. Gaps in math were 6 points smaller in 4th grade and 11 points smaller in 8th grade, compared with the national averages.

“We feel fortunate to have a state assessment system and the NAEP to balance and compare, to make sure we are headed in the right direction,” said Mary Jane Tappen, Florida’s deputy chancellor for curriculum, instruction, and student services.

The state’s K-12 chancellor, Michael Grego, said Florida has made significant policy changes targeting the Hispanic achievement gap in the past decade, including requiring any school administrator or teacher in a core content area or an elective who will have at least one ell student to go through 60 hours of training “focused on specific strategies about how best to teach someone learning the English language.” English teachers must receive 300 hours of training in English as a second language.

The state also has an advisory committee including Hispanic parents and community members who weigh in on any changes to the state’s accountability system or English-language-proficiency program.

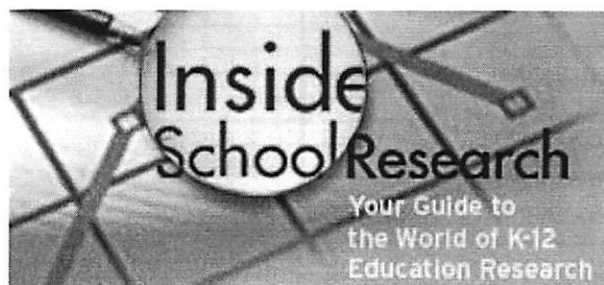
“We’re dedicated to closing the achievement gap by half by 2014,” Ms. Tappen said. “It would have been to our students’ disadvantage if we had not had high expectations and continued to push.”

With regard to the NAEP U.S. history results, some analysts suggest the progress black and Hispanic 4th graders have made since 1994 in shrinking the achievement gap with whites might not mean they are better historians.

“I suspect that the gains reflect an improvement in reading skills, not an improvement in knowledge of history,” said Diane Ravitch, a research professor at New York



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University invited by the National Assessment Governing Board to comment on the results.

Hispanic students overall climbed 23 points since 1994 on NAEP's 0-to-500-point scale, blacks 22 points, and whites gained 9 points.

That said, the achievement gaps are still large. For example, while the percentage of Hispanic 4th graders scoring below basic dropped from 64 to 44 percent since 1994, far fewer whites—17 percent—were below basic in 2010.

Vol. 30, Issue 36, Page 14